

and clambered ashore next door, where a small Chihuahua yipped and pranced in front of him like a little line-backer to keep him from further invading her territory. His hard kick in her direction that clipped her shoulder (not normally a cruel man, was Eugene, but he was in intense pain, and this made him react uncharacteristically) brought Juanita charging out the sliding glass door to chase the wet trespasser back into the water from which he had come.

MY FUNNY VALENTINE: RUTH AND ELLIS

Ellis took Ruth's car down to the Zippy Lube and Tune and had the radiator flushed, cut the pink carbon customer's receipt into the shape of a heart and placed this inside a Valentine's Day card, signed it, Love Ya, Babe. Ruth crumpled the heart up in her fist and punched Ellis in the eye, then chased him out the front door and up the block before she gave up the chase.

Ellis slunk back into the neighborhood after a prudent amount of time had elapsed, holed up at Clete and Juanita's place with an ice pack and a beer out on the patio. Clete laughed at his pal's stupidity, and Juanita said, "If you've got any brains, Ellis, you'll run right out and buy that woman an expensive bottle of perfume." Ellis lifted the ice pack and blinked his swelling eye and whined, "But I already shelled out forty bucks for the flush." Juanita threw her hands up and slipped back into the house, muttering a Men-Are-Idiots lament.

Down at the department store at the mall, Ellis flinched when the woman at the cosmetics counter — a small light brown woman so pretty and perfectly coiffed that it hurt — said, "Sixty-five dollars, sir," in reference to his timid and apprehensive question as to the price of a very tiny bottle of amber fluid. He grabbed his chest and staggered backwards; Clete caught him as he began his tilt to the floor. The cosmetic lady's face pinched itself up into a subtle expression of disgust as she said, "Maybe you should consider Woolworth's, a cheap box of chocolates."

He and Clete considered, instead, the Disabled American Veterans' Thrift Store down on the coast route, where for fifty cents they were able to purchase a tiny and ornate glass bottle very similar to the one that had held the expensive amber fluid back at the mall; then they considered the discount drug store out on Loma Alta Boulevard, and a bottle of plain-label after-shave.

Ruth was satisfied; she kissed her husband, applied some more just before bed, then enticed Ellis into an amorous adventure.

His only mistake was in licking her neck, coming into direct contact with the 'perfume.' His tongue swelled up and went numb, and then began to burn as if on fire, and he — in his temporary superior position — drove his face past his wife's and attempted to remove the offending fluid via a licking of the pillow with a movement so panicked and vigorous that it drew the entire length of his body into a serpentine-like writhe, eliciting from the laid-back Ruth a moan of, "Oh Ellis!"

HEADS AND TAILS BLUES

The best scientific evidence available said that sea level had stabilized, making the south shore of the new Loma Alta Lagoon appear better than ever to the honchos at Royalty Resorts, so those intrepid guys and gals drew straws to see who would get to go in and make a few offers, again, and Eugene Pengelly got the short one

The shakes rippled in when he saw the blue water through a corroded and warped cyclone fence that spanned two adjacent houses. Those jitters were so bad by the time he'd parked in front of the Leahy house that he resorted to a self hug, his head resting atop the steering wheel, his eyes shut tight as he drew deep breaths to calm himself. This is where it had happened, his double mutilation, Wound One: an ear nipped off by the Leahy's pet pig gone vicious; Wound Two: a soup-bowl-sized hunk of meat scooped out of his buttock by a big blue shark when, in an effort to avoid a beating following the pig attack, he sought sanctuary in the lagoon. A little game of porcine/Carcharinus glaucus heads and tails, a horrific experience that didn't end, from a physical standpoint, until the last of the plastic surgeries was completed nine months later.

The psychological scars remained.

A rapping on the passenger window jerked Eugene back into his leather upholstery: Ellis Leahy — a broad-brimmed straw hat pushed back on his head, a weed wacker in his hand — stood bent at the waist on the curb strip grass, grinning into the car. "Well, well, well. If it ain't old Gene Pengelly of Royalty Resorts fame. What's up, Eugene? You got us another offer?" "No, no!" Eugene blurted through the hot glass. "Relax, big guy. Ruth's not here and the pig's tied up in the back yard. Why don't you come on in for a beer, run your offer by me?" Eugene forced a trembling smile onto his face and shook his head and replied, "Maybe some other time, Mr. Leahy." "Call me Ellis," said Ellis, as Sandra, his wife's supposedly tied up pig, placed her front hooves on top of the creaking redwood fence that ran between the Johnson and Leahy homes, popping her